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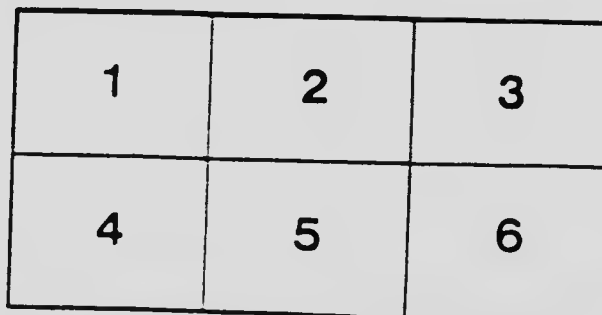
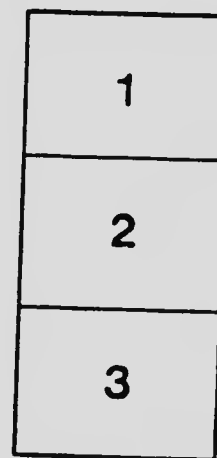
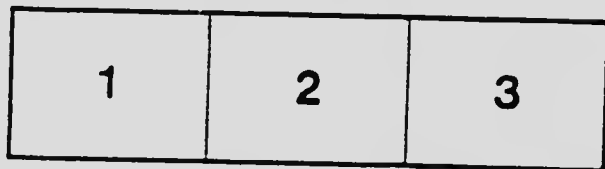
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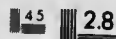
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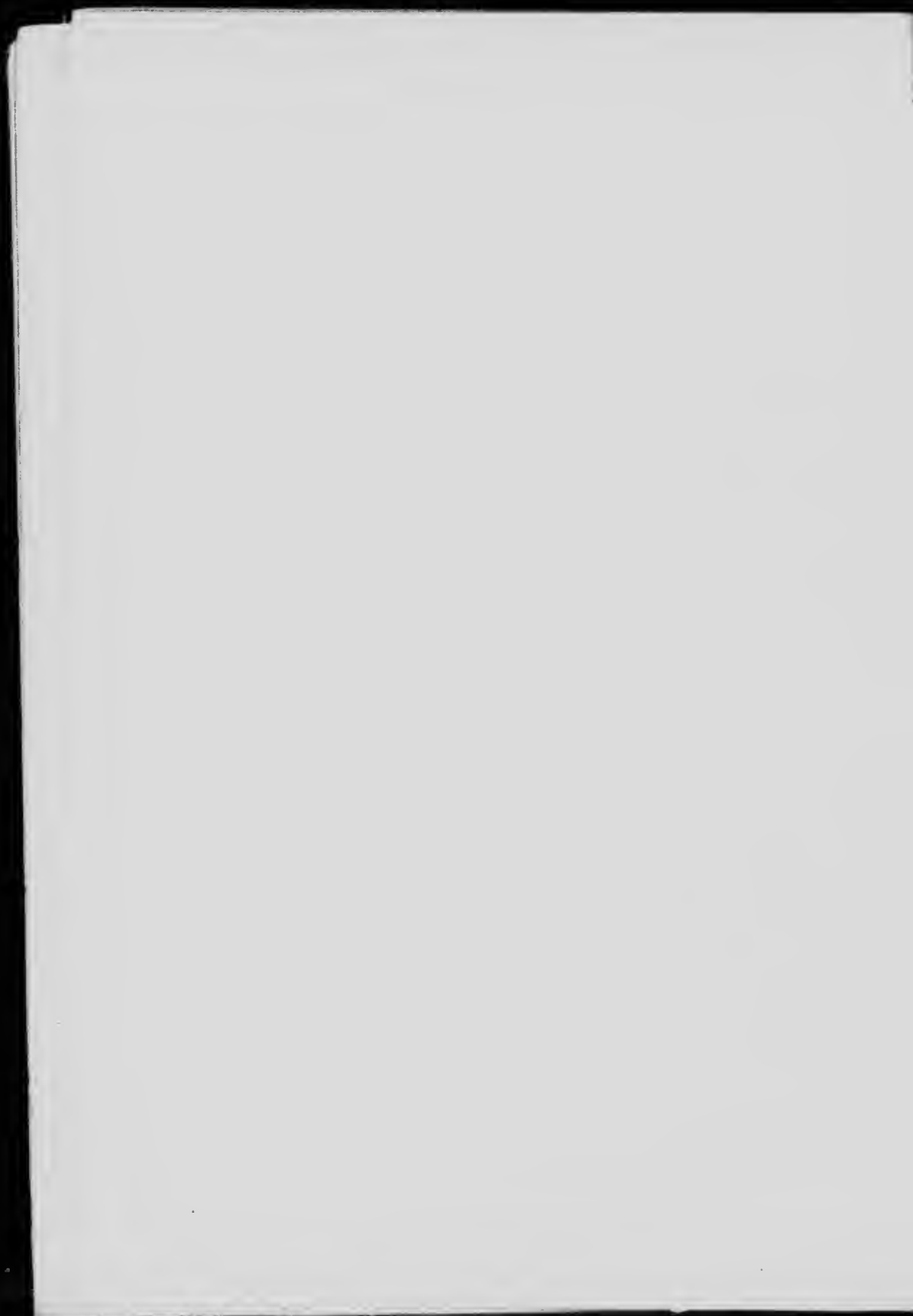
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THE
EVOLUTION OF THOUGHT
IN MODERN FRANCE

BY
ERNEST DIMNET

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THE EVOLUTION OF THOUGHT IN MODERN FRANCE

THE object of the following pages is to account for the present state of public opinion and of national feeling in France by tracing them to their historic causes.

A war is one of the greatest trials that a nation can undergo : it taxes all its energies and possibilities and reveals its moral condition exactly as a great sentimental or intellectual crisis reveals the latent power or the unsuspected weakness of individuals. Under difficult circumstances of this kind a man not only acts but speaks in a manner which, whether to his credit or to his disgrace, proclaims the principles or the fallacies on which he has lived so far.

It is unquestionable that France has borne the brunt of the declaration of war, of the trying first weeks which followed, and of the slow months which elapsed after the battle of the Marne, in a manner which even her enemies must have admired, and which they probably did not expect. If you refer to the Yellow Paper (*Livre Jaune*) published in December 1914 by the French Government, you will find that the Germans had long cherished the idea that France was a decaying nation.

Were there traces of a similar notion, more or less conscious and reasoned, outside of Germany? It is impossible to deny it. Everybody must have met people who were surprised, even if they were delighted, to see France giving evidence of complete self-possession and following without effort the guidance of her best leaders.

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Everybody must also remember meeting people who protested against this surprise and stated emphatically that they had always believed in the French nation, had never consented to look upon the French as modern *Graeculi* (the Greeks of the decadence) or, as a famous writer once said even less politely, as the monkeys in the European jungle.

Such differences of opinion can never be altogether unfounded; and the inference which a logical person who knew nothing of French history in the last four or five decades would draw could only be that conflicting tendencies must have been at work in French society. This conclusion is correct. Since 1870, the date when France, defeated by Germany, weakened furthermore by the Commune, and exhausted financially by the ransom (£200,000,000) she had to pay down to her conquerors, was left to heal her wounds as best she could—there have been two currents in French thought, consequently also in French morals, and according as observers happened to take note of one or the other, their impression was one of disgust or on the contrary of hopefulness.

Most people who followed the trend of French thought between the years 1876–95 were pessimistic. It is true that during the first five years after the war France gave a marvellous example of vitality. In those few years she managed to pay off the Germans who occupied her fortified towns along the eastern frontier, and she accomplished such a thorough reform of her military arrangements (keeping her soldiers under the colours for five years, rapidly improving her armament, and copying intelligently the organization of her enemies), that Bismarck became nervous and was for picking another quarrel the result of which must be her final destruction.

But this effort was the combination of a great national

impulse with the leadership of a politician who frequently came near to being a great statesman, M. Thiers, the first President of the Republic. It left the ideas of philosophers, scientists, literary people, journalists, and generally the so-called thinking circles where they were; and these ideas were practically the same which prevailed ten years before, under the Second Empire. Now, the ideas in the air during the Second Empire were not conducive to moral health. Nobody will deny that the most influential authors of that period were Hugo, Leconte de Lisle, Baudelaire, Michelet, Quinet, George Sand, Flaubert, the Goncourts, Dumas, and—among the more philosophic writers—Littré, Auguste Comte, Taine, and Renan. I know that besides these names others could be mentioned—Caro, Veuillot, Lacordaire, Montalembert, O. Feuillet, for instance—which would point to a different direction of thought; but it will be found that none of them is really representative, and that their celebrity either did not last, or only came, as in the case of Veuillot, long after the writer's death, or was confined to a small section of the public. In fact when we ask ourselves who were the Prophets of that day, as an accurate and instructive critic, M. Guérard, calls them, it is the list I first gave that inevitably occurs.

Now, one general characteristic of those writers is that, when compared with the best-known English writers of the middle Victorian period, they strike us at once as being what is called advanced. This expression is probably taken from the military vocabulary. Some people have a way of thinking which immediately suggests the vanguard of an army, or even its forlorn hope. And there is something invariably attractive in that position; originality, daring, contempt for ready-made notions, all imply brilliance and at first sight a quality akin to courage.

It is only on second thoughts we realize that, given certain conditions of the mental atmosphere, it requires no mean courage to be on the conservative or prudent side ; that there is little danger in running the gauntlet of criticism when one has popularity on one's side ; and that we all, more or less, have occasionally notions which we know are brilliant and might be dazzling if we chose to give them expression, but which, as Charlotte Brontë said, we feel we had better keep to ourselves.

In fact all those famous writers appear to-day to have been unduly advanced on some points, and several of them (as I shall have occasion to repeat) became aware of it themselves.

To begin with the philosophers, it was a good thing to rise above the shallow eclecticism of Cousin, who imagined he could build a philosophy by borrowing a bit from one philosopher, a bit from another, or above the Scottish School, who never went beyond psychology ; and it was more than advisable to take into account all the positive facts and laws ascertained by modern science before endeavouring to lay down metaphysical principles : all this Littré, Comte and Taine did with much method, erudition, insight, and, one may even say, with genius. But it is no less true that to-day these philosophers appear not only belated but hurtful. They disbelieved all spiritual realities, and the result was that crude readers inferred materialism from their works. Thousands of so-called positivists of all degree denied the existence of the soul because Littré and Taine said that soul-phenomena were not scientifically ascertainable, or the existence of free-will because Taine had written that ' virtue and vice are products like sugar or vitriol ', an irrefutable statement when properly understood, but dangerously easy to misunderstand.

Renan also was a rarely fitted man, not only as a writer of terse graceful French, a thinker of agile if somewhat too flexible intelligence, but even as a scholar and an exponent of what used to be called in those days the Higher Criticism. But admirably equipped as he was, he had serious shortcomings which to-day make him appear strangely out of date. He thought that science could explain—and with respect to religious questions explain away—everything. He had an easy jaunty manner of treating Christianity and even Theism as poetic beliefs born of deep instincts of the human soul, which, fearlessly analysed, turned out to be only the mythical expression of these instincts; God was merely a convenient word, the resurrection of Christ was a legend created by love, and His divinity was the metaphysical translation of similar legends. All this sounded distinguished and final; and the result was that belief appeared uncritical and undeveloped. As a matter of fact it took years of reconsideration of the same questions to enable a man like Dr. Sanday, for instance, who knows a great deal more about Biblical criticism than was known in Renan's day, to be respected as a scholar though speaking as a believer. One had to be advanced or to be regarded as a fossil.

Some people would occasionally observe that these doctrines might be scientific but their immediate effect was morally depressing and even deteriorating. If it was not certain that there was a divine influence in the world or a spiritual substance in man, if there was no free-will and we were the playthings of fatality, what was the use of a great deal that had hitherto been held indispensable to good living and happy dying? Of this objection Taine disposed at once with the greatest ease: speculation and life were different things, as art and our every-

day avocations are different ; when the philosopher set about philosophizing his duty was to forget that there were people who might overhear his inward reflections. Philosophy was autonomous even if it was dispiriting, and its effects were mere contingencies.

This view had considerable vogue not only among scientists and *savants*, but even among literary people who claimed for art the rights which philosophy asserted for itself. The famous formula, *l'art pour l'art*, for which the Goncourt brothers were responsible, but which accounts admirably for the literary attitude of Flaubert, or Leconte de Lisle, was a translation of the same doctrine : the artist had every right to describe what he pleased, in any way he pleased, provided he did it artistically ; moral or immoral consequences were nothing to him. All this tended, as may easily be seen, to isolate thinkers and writers, and all those who thought themselves entitled to imitate them, from their time, country, and fellow beings in the sole company of what was declared to be Truth or Beauty. A perilous state of affairs, this, in which the supposed sages of a nation profess indifference to the interests of their country.

It is needless to say much about the advanced character of the works of George Sand, Dumas, and Baudelaire. The first two writers practically taught that passion is only accountable to itself and that the desires of man when they reach a certain intensity overrule the ordinary canons of morals ; the third was a morbid decadent who even now defies analysis. As to Hugo, Quinet, and Michelet, at the stage of their career which corresponds to the Second Empire, they were, above all, humanitarians who loved all mankind—with the exception of Catholics, whom they abhorred—and firmly believed in the prompt establishment of the United States of Europe.

The catastrophe of 1870, which showed to the French that the United States of Europe was a rather premature conception, and demonstrated that courage, self-denial, and the virtues without which a nation must go to ruin are inconsistent with materialism, ought to have brought about a revulsion of feeling and of thought. It did produce this result in a few eminent individuals; and until 1876 the country at large, owing to its Government, appeared to have gone back to sound principles. But after 1876 the outlook changed rapidly. The masses began to forget the formidable lesson they had received a few years before, and the newly elected representatives of the country were very different from their predecessors. Where the difference lay was not very difficult to see. Most of these men had been students in Paris during the Second Empire, and their intellectual background was generally that which I have described above. Their philosophers were Taine or Haeckel, their theologian was Renan; the novels they had read were those of George Sand, the plays they had applauded were those of Dumas; they had believed in the United States of Europe, and imagined that the establishment of the French Republic was a first step towards the pacification of the world. The consequence was that the advanced doctrines which, in 1865, were confined to books, were found ten years after to underlie the Government of the country and to be paramount in the formation of the public spirit.

An objection must rise in the mind of the English reader: is it possible that literature, which after all is only the solace of idle hours, should have so much influence on the trend of public affairs? and is it not a fact that numberless French people were to be found,

under the Second Empire and long after, whose intellectual preferences had never been tainted by these dangerous principles ?

It should be remembered that the French have a tendency hardly found in the other European nations, and seldom met with in England, to be carried away by their intellectual notions ; all their popular movements, all their Revolutions were made in accordance with theories recklessly acted upon. A great deal of the fascination which the French nation exercised, along with the dread it inspired in Europe during the twenty years which followed 1789, arose from this uncompromising enthusiasm about ideas and consequent propagandism.

On the other hand, it is a fact that many French people ignored or disliked the popular writers who are representative of the Second Empire ; they had conservative views in morals and often in religion, and many a foreigner must have been surprised at finding them so remote from the type he imagined. All this is true. But it is a law of history that a country is moulded by its Government, because most individuals are passive, and even when they are not so, do not easily discover the means of raising a protest ; the press is on the side of the majority, and makes it the more difficult for the dissenting few to express their feelings.

In fact it is impossible to contradict two statements concerning the historical development of France during the last forty years, which bear out the principles I have just recalled. In the first place, it is universally admitted that the eight or nine Chambers which succeeded one another since 1876 were advanced. Their philosophy was not only anti-clerical—that is to say, opposed to the

interference of churchmen in civil affairs where they have no business—but it was anti-catholic and even anti-christian. These Parliaments suppressed religious orders and confiscated their property, they denounced the Concordat with the Pope, sent back his ambassador, and finally confiscated the Church property, all which was anti-catholic. But they also favoured and occasionally enforced methods of education which regarded the mention of God in schools as a breach of 'neutrality'; in 1902 the Premier Combes was hooted down by his majority for saying that he believed in the soul, and he had to explain and practically apologize for his words. This, no doubt, showed a hostility to Christianity obviously born of the philosophy of Taine and Renan.

In the second place, it is also impossible to deny that many people scattered all over the world regarded France as a decaying nation, and Paris as a centre of corruption. Allusions to this belief were frequent in the press of most countries. How did this notion come to be spread about to that extent? It was owing largely, no doubt, to the existence in Paris of scandalous places of amusement, *which catered mostly for foreign visitors* but which were regarded as representative. There was certainly a considerable amount of injustice or exaggeration in the notion that France was mirrored in its capital, and Paris in its worst theatres. But on the other hand, it would be futile to gainsay that the great novelist of the years 1875 to 1895 was Zola, and the great novelist of the years 1890–1905 Anatole France; and the popularity of these two men was not likely to decrease the impression left by the licentiousness I have just spoken of.

Zola was a talented, industrious man, with a curious sense of literary responsibility united to a complete

absence of decency. His object, like that of the Realists before him, was to be true to life, and his ambition was to make his description of society so accurate that philosophical laws could be immediately deduced from it. Balzac, who towered above him as an artist, had cherished the same hope, and we do not feel that he succeeded. The laws of the moral world have been obscured rather than emphasized by dramatists and novelists ; and it was not until the nineteenth century that people went to them for the ethical guidance which they sadly need themselves. As a matter of fact, Zola, in spite of his philosophical pretensions, only produced a one-sided picture of the lowest society ; if one went by his thirty volumes it would seem as if there were only one class in France, and all the representatives of that class were vicious. But he was unequalled in his particular *genre*, and Anatole France could say with mock admiration that nobody had been able to heap up such a dunghill. The result of Zola's success was double : it confirmed the French in the outspokenness they frequently affect, and it convinced foreigners that a nation which they supposed to be represented by such a writer was in a very bad way.

Anatole France, whose success pushed Zola into the shade, is apparently very different from the latter. He is supremely exquisite, dainty, and light-handed, with dashes of cynicism which lend to his elegance something akin to force ; he has knowledge and intelligence, he is merciful to human weaknesses and full of pity for sorrow. But all these fascinating appearances do not prevent him from being fundamentally only another Zola. The brutes whom Zola depicted were automata submitted to the laws of a world in which physical instincts reign supreme ; but so are the flitting

figures which Anatole France's crayons sketch so deftly. Anatole France does not believe in goodness any more than Zola does. There is a great deal of suffering in his works, and suffering seems to be morally superior to selfishness; but the writer shows us all the time that this is nothing but a delusion and that people in anguish are as selfish as their luckier fellows. The scale of moral values is absent from this view of the world, and the absence gradually appeared with deplorable clearness in Anatole France: there are people, even in England—I might say especially in England at the present day—who will not have it said Anatole France has become a rather coarse Socialist, thinking no more of patriotism than of virtue, and making game of the principles without which nations as well as individuals can have no self-respect. But facts are facts, and if anybody wants to understand how Anatole France could, three months before the war, sign an anti-militarist poster which the Germans must have read with delight, let him refer to *The Island of the Penguins*.

That the same deterioration was visible in thousands of Anatole France's admirers is also a fact. Frenchmen, when they have nothing better to do, love the affectation of cynicism or scepticism which disports itself in their literature from the *fabliaux* to Renan, and fills the works of Rabelais and Voltaire. They long gave way to that propensity; and the serious-minded observer who casually saw them smile and joke about the past, present, and future of their history could hardly refrain from pronouncing the verdict: a decaying nation.

These, then, are the symptoms which struck the people whom I described at the beginning of this essay as unable to conceal their surprise at the energy displayed by France in her hour of trial.

We should now advert to the symptoms which led others, more sanguine or better-informed students of France, to the conviction that she was sound at heart.

First of all one ought to remember that a country cannot be judged exclusively, or even mainly, by its literature. Literature is not so artificial as the theatre, because its field is wider, but it is far, all the same, from being the adequate expression of a community. The fact is that the bulk of the French nation was ignorant of, or averse to, the philosophy implied in the literature which scandalized the rest of the world. Foreigners who happened to stay in Paris—to say nothing of less sophisticated towns—long enough to see with their own eyes frequently expressed their surprise at finding the French home so different from the descriptions of the novelists. It took more time or more penetration to satisfy oneself that the affectation of scepticism or cynicism common in certain circles was only an affectation which any opportunity for seriousness could dispel; yet some people had a chance of coming to that certainty, and must have taken it as a matter of course when Zola came forward as a champion of morals, or more recently when Anatole France spoke up for patriotism: books were books and life was life—give a man a chance to rise above the dalliances of literature and he would be sure to act decently.

Still, literature is in one way a necessity. At a pinch a man will act on his impulses, and books will have but little share in his decisions; but in more peaceful periods our intellect craves formulas, and according to the tendency visible in such formulas a country will, in its daily life, make for idealism or for materialism, for courage or for indulgence. If there had been no

traces between 1870 and the present day of what, in default of a better word, we must call a reaction, France might with good reason be called a decadent nation. But not only were such traces visible, they were dominant in the most important realms of human activity; and there is no exaggeration in saying that the characteristic of contemporary French thought is its strong reactionary tendency.

It is remarkable that two of the writers whom I pointed out above as representing the speculative recklessness of the Second Empire actually refuted their own theories. These two writers are no others than Taine and Renan, and it is useless to dwell on the importance of a change in such influential authors. I do not mean that Taine gave up his philosophy or Renan his criticism: a man seldom remodels his intellectual equipment after he is forty; but both Taine and Renan adopted after the war a completely different attitude towards life from that which they had shown before. Their conviction was that, being philosophers, their sole business was to philosophize, and that the consequences of their philosophy did not matter; if the conclusion of their speculations was that patriotism was a remnant of barbarism, let those who heard of that conclusion act as their conscience dictated. The double catastrophe of the defeat and the Commune staggered this security: the author of *L'Intelligence* and the author of *L'Avenir de la Science* had it brought home to them that, in spite of their long years of intellectual aloofness, they belonged to a community of men and not of pure spirits, and for the first time the civic instinct was awakened in them. The results are well known. Taine devoted the rest of his life to the eleven volumes of his *Origines de la France*

contemporaine, and Renan summed up his reflections on politics in *La Réforme intellectuelle et morale de la France*; and lo! these great works of the once advanced writers were not advanced at all; they were, on the contrary, resolutely conservative. Both historians showed the same distrust of vague aspirations as political motives and of democracy as a government. Both preferred the English habit of patching up to the French way of pulling down and rebuilding. Both regarded the Revolution as a failure, and modern demagogism as a form of cowardice. They stood for order, morals, and self-sacrifice as the basis of politics worth the name.

It is not exceptional to meet, even to-day, with people who, preferring the ideas of Taine and Renan in their first development to those which they afterwards advocated, resent any mention of the change I have just noticed. Such people, of course, do not count intellectually; had they come across Taine or Renan they would have promptly secured the contempt of two minds which never tried to get away from facts. But, unintelligent narrow-mindedness is not universal, and the readers of Taine's *Origines* and Renan's *Réforme* were deeply impressed. There is no doubt that the conservative tendency which has become more and more noticeable in favourite writers like Jules Lemaître, Faguet, Capus, Prévost, and hundreds of their imitators can be traced, if not to Taine's or Renan's evolution, at least to the altered attitude created by that evolution: literary people began to take an active interest in politics, and they paid more attention to tangible results than to theories, or, above all, to eloquent declamations. The hostility to the professional politician, which is a great feature of the

young generation, has come down to them from Taine and Renan in a direct line.

As I said above, Taine and Renan never reconsidered their philosophy. They went on believing that all phenomena, being reducible to material causes and effects, could be traced by science to their farthest origins. The consequence of this doctrine was double : first of all it was a denial of the necessity of faith, seeing that there were no mysteries, and furthermore it was a denial of God. So belief in science was associated with complete religious incredulity. Crude minds, which are always anxious to appear free from trammels, affected exceedingly scientific principles.

Experience alone would have been enough to explode the scientific fallacy : Pasteur said that the deeper he went, the more difficult the discovery of causes became ; and everybody must notice, as well as this great man, that the riddle of the universe was no nearer its solution in the nineteenth century than it was in the days of Aristotle. But the belief in science, which was a dogma with Taine, was denounced by men who were not Taine's inferiors either as *savants* or as philosophers. Only specialists know the names of M. Lachelier and M. Boutroux, but everybody knew the name of Brunetière, who went round proclaiming the 'bankruptcy of science', and most people who count came to hear of the famous mathematician Poincaré, and especially of the famous philosopher Bergson, who at the present moment is by far the most successful exponent of his speciality. And what is the gist of Bergson's teaching ? the very reverse of Taine's : it is the multiform affirmation that science is a mere construction of the intellect and that we have no guarantee of its accuracy ; it is, moreover, an affirmation that there is a spiritual element in man and in the

world for which physics or biology can never account. This of course provided a sufficient basis for religion: belief, in M. Bergson's philosophy, is an eminently scientific attitude. So is patriotism, for it is another great feature of Bergsonism that it has more respect for man's instincts than for his intelligence.

On the whole, we can say that French science and philosophy are no longer antagonistic to the idea of free-will, morals, and religion, and the rare champions of materialism seem curiously out of date.

Literature shows a transformation of the same kind. Towards 1880 Zola was the undisputed master of the novel, and Naturalism, i. e. a coarser form of Realism, was triumphant; but it was the end of its success. A young writer who could not be called a man of genius, but who was sensitive and capable of delicate intuitions, Paul Bourget, felt that the public had been surfeited with brutality, and that there was a chance for a kind of fiction which would make more room for the soul than for the body. His success was immediate and universal. In less than five years, Zola appeared not only indecent but inartistic, and, what is even more damning, false. People began to shrug their shoulders at a view of life which presented men and women as mere automata acting under animal impulses. Nobody questioned any more that, even in a self-indulgent society, instinct is not the universal law and that even the lowest types of humanity know doubts and struggles. This meant the restoration of the moral element, of respect for sacrifice and contempt for selfishness in literature. Bourget's characters were weak, but he knew it, and they themselves confessed it: this was enough to dispel the stifling atmosphere which Zola's school had gathered around life.

In the last thirty years realism has certainly not died out, and we ought to be grateful, for realism rightly understood means nothing else than the search after human verity; but the success of Bourget, Bazin, Bordeaux, more recently of E. Psichari and E. Clermont, in the novel, also the immense superiority of F. de Curel on the stage, show clearly that the French once more include manifestations of the soul in their notion of the real.

Anatole France had his share in Zola's defeat: the terse criticism of Zola's inspiration which I quoted above soon became a household word; but example is stronger than any criticism, and Anatole France's novels did more than his generally overpraised critical works to rid French literature of cumbersome Naturalism. This statement may seem at first sight to contradict what I said above of the essential similarity between the spirit of both Anatole France and Zola's novels, but it is only an appearance. With the average reader style counts less than matter, and to such a one *Le Lys rouge* may be more dangerous than *La Terre*; but with artists it is not so. Anatole France is a Materialist and a Socialist in his spirit, but in his manner he is a storyteller in the most charming French tradition, with a disdain for what the Romanticists and the Naturalists called force, but which was mostly bombast, and a partiality for clarity, elegance, gracefulness, wit, and generally the literary qualities which the world, not so long ago, regarded as eminently French. It was by these qualities, above all, that Anatole France became contagious; and the consequence was that the hundreds of young writers who in the last twenty years have more or less felt his influence or that of his own masters—Renan first and the French classics afterwards—are generally French,

not only in manner but in spirit, and impress us by an independence towards foreign sources of judgement or impression which is a highly conscious form of patriotism.

Conscious as it is, this patriotism is not always explicit: the writer thinks it superfluous to dwell on what he supposes the reader will feel. Yet there is a literary school of rare fascination which has made it its business to brace up the French public by the frank expression of a patriotism so resolute as to appear sometimes narrow. The name of Maurice Barrès is not universally known in England, but no name is so popular in France, and it is synonymous with a passionate love of the French soil and the French tradition. The story of Barrès' evolution has been frequently told, and can be summed up in a few words. Towards 1890, when Barrès, then a very young man, first made his mark, there was no question of regarding him as an apostle of anything except pleasure. But it was pleasure of a refined and almost exalted kind, the sensation of full self-realization much more than any other. A theory of life underlay this attitude, which Barrès was not long in developing. He knew that the highest pleasure for a man was the consciousness that he was himself, but the consciousness of being oneself, he, like everybody who has led a spiritual life, soon realized was associated with the environment in which each one of us has grown up: a man was the most himself in his own country, surrounded with familiar associations, and in the constant enjoyment of the sentimental or intellectual heritage left to him by his ancestors. This very simple observation is no novelty to a plain man brought up away from the sophistication of modern philosophy; but it struck the ultra-refined generation of Barrès as a discovery, and its development led to the extraordinary success,

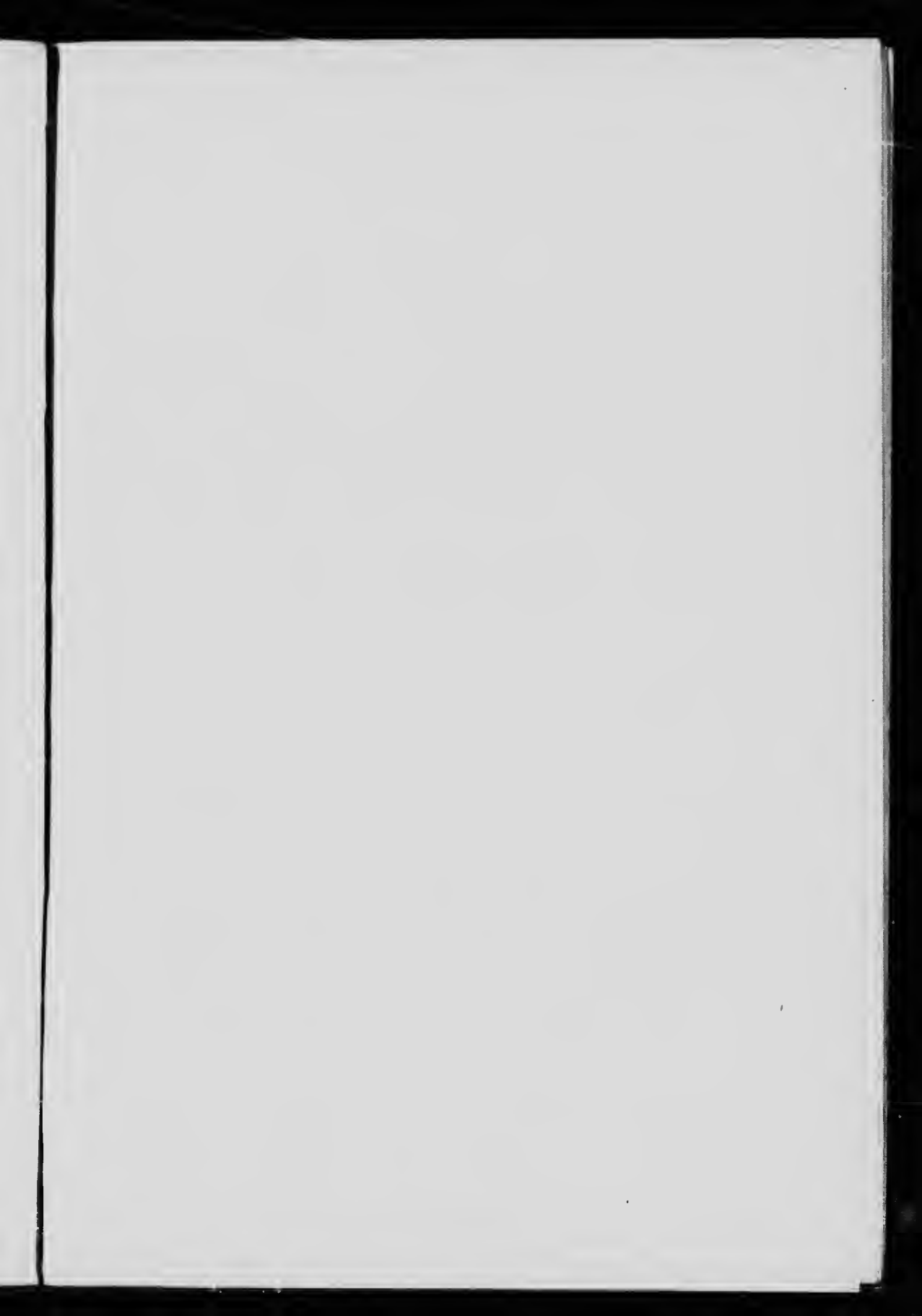
first of all of literary Nationalism, but also of Nationalism without any reference to literature. Thousands of volumes in the past twenty years have expressed the joy of their authors at feeling themselves in community with the historic tradition of their country, and there are hardly any French works of this period in which the reflection of the same consciousness does not appear. As this kind of literature became more successful it also became freed of its original selfishness; and while we have seen it reach to the expression of self-sacrifice in the works of a grandson of Renan, Ernest Psichari, we have also seen it attain to the perfection of its effect, in the death of the same Psichari, killed on the battle-field at the beginning of the war, and in the life of admirable self-denial which Barrès himself has led of late years.

The reader must now see for himself what a gulf there is between the unreality of the humanitarianism preached by Michelet and the wide-awake attention of Nationalism to the destinies of France; between the sombre stoicism which Naturalism was at its best, or the cynicism it was at its worst, and the brave optimism of most contemporary writers. Bearing in mind the transformation I have just outlined, it is easy to understand how shocking any mention of France as a corrupt and decaying nation must have been to people who really knew what path the national genius had followed in the last thirty years. They realized that France was more French than she had been since the early days of Napoleon I, when militarism, yet in its glorious youth, had not become tyrannical, and they felt that only an occasion was lacking to reveal the wonderful rejuvenation.

The occasion, of course, was the war; but the war only

22 EVOLUTION OF THOUGHT IN FRANCE

took by surprise the ignorant or the thoughtless. In 1905, in 1908, especially in 1911, the French nation had known the suspense which filled the last week of July 1914; and if in 1905 there had been more astonishment than fear at the prospect of an encounter with Germany, in 1908 and in 1911 there was neither astonishment nor nervousness. Anybody who knew the trend both of the better literature and of popular feeling must have realized that when the crisis came France would surely be equal to it. There was no likelihood of any differences between the soldier-workman and the soldier-writer of the Péguy or Psichari type. In fact both classes of men appear to be in perfect unanimity, not because of the overwhelming pressure of the circumstances, but because the war found them in possession of the best national characteristics, which are clear intelligence on one hand and cheerful decision on the other. It would be foolish to hope that this unbroken unity will persevere after the peace; the politicians who, at the Radical Convention of April 1914, almost on the eve of the war, insisted on reducing the French Army by a third, out of spite against President Poincaré even more than in accordance with pacifist theories, will not be shamed out of existence: we must expect to hear once more vague declamations as soon as pressing facts which demand prompt action can be pushed into the background; but professional politicians nowhere represent the populations they deceive, and French thought, in the plain conversation of the peasant as well as in the writings of the literary man, will be healthier than it was during six or seven generations.



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